Exhibition Review

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Dublin City and Hugh Lane Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland, February 26–August 30, 2009

In the words of Homi Bhabha, the chief effect of colonial power is "the production of hybridization" or, in the words of Patrick Brantlinger, "imperialisms—indeed, all master/slave relations—are always two-way streets."[1] Few artists have demonstrated this as colorfully as the British-born, Nigerian-raised artist Yinka Shonibare. His striking use of batik, a wax-printed cotton fabric (which originated in Indonesian design, was historically printed for the Dutch and British export markets and is now consumed in contemporary West Africa) to clothe his headless figurative sculptural tableaux have been delighting audiences in Europe and North America since the 1990s. Deploying what Anne Hollander has termed the "symbiotic relation" between fashion and art history and feminist art's exploitation of cloth and "clothing as subject" the batik fabric has become, intentionally or not, Shonibare's leitmotif.[2] In 2009, as a major mid-career retrospective of his work traveled from the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia, to the Brooklyn Museum in New York and to the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, the textile historian and critic Jessica Hemmings cautioned that there was a "danger of his brightly patterned cloth beginning to feel like a one-liner."[3]

Earlier and more pointedly, in 2005, the American art historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie argued that Shonibare's commissioned installation for *Documenta 11* in Kassel, in 2002, was undermined in its efficacy as he had "exchanged a sophisticated critique of Victorian claims of racial purity for a melodramatic focus on explicit scenes of Victorian debauchery."[4] Cautious of critique and not wanting to initiate an egg fight, critics such as Ogbechie and Hemmings have also placed particular stress on the serious intellectual rigor underpinning Shonibare's continued use of batik to create something that

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH McBRINN
Joseph McBrinn lectures in Design History at Belfast School of Art, the University of Ulster, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

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is as yet, most would agree, far from redundant. Indeed, without question since 2000 a spate of solo shows have demonstrated Shonibare's continued inventiveness and prodigiousness. From the 2002 self-titled show at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York to the 2004 *Double Dutch* show at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, to *Flower Time* at London's Stephen Friedman Gallery in 2006, and *Jardin d'Amour* at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2007, culminating in his recent Antipodean–American retrospective. However, one show that elegantly showcased Shonibare's remarkable creative abilities was a small exhibition commissioned for the Dublin City and Hugh Lane Gallery of Modern Art in 2009, entitled *Egg Fight* (based on Jonathan Swift's satirical travelog, *Gulliver's Travels*), and is the focus of this review. Indeed, as his globetrotting retrospective opened in Sydney, Shonibare revealed:

> *At present I am re-reading Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726), which interests me on a number of levels. I am particularly interested in the question of Gulliver's empathy with the different cultures he encounters. He sees that they are different and they see he is different … Gulliver's voyages also see him becoming involved in internal power struggles in the lands he visits but he himself is also, at various stages, both powerful and powerless depending on the context. Which brings us back to the question of power and its contexts and how we assume and in some cases are beholden to power.* (Kent 2008: 45)

Ireland as a space of unresolved postcolonial hybridity, within Europe, seems an ideal location for Shonibare's work. In 2001, the Irish public got their first opportunity to see his work when he showed *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) in

Figure 1
Yinka Shonibare, *Egg Fight*, 2009. Installation at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. Mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton fabric, leather boots, replica guns, rope, polystyrene eggs and silicon. 8½m long × 4m wide. Photograph Eugene Langan. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery (London) and James Cohan Gallery (New York).

the Vantage Point group exhibition at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin. The show aimed to bring together contemporary art "informed by everyday life, addressing current issues such as ecology, technology, popular culture and globalization."[5] Although criticized for "not having an angle on anything," the title itself doing "little more than paper over the tenuous links between the artists," nevertheless Shonibare's work was seen as having more than "raw novelty value."[6] Fast-forward a decade and the *Egg Fight* installation at Dublin's Hugh Lane demonstrates that Shonibare's sensitive, if satirical, use of batik as a potent metaphor in visualizing the "horrors of colonialism" has established him as one of the world's leading artists and commentators on the ethnic/aesthetic dimensions of globalization (Guldemond 2004: 20). As the best of his work does, *Egg Fight* continues the deconstruction of the tropes and iconoclasm of Europe's long eighteenth century and its foundations not in Enlightenment but in militarist imperialist expansionism, and in this Jonathan Swift's text proved in every way a perfect foil for Shonibare. The installation, although not directly illustrative, contained two (headless) figures (one Lilliputian and one Bledfuscudian) shooting at each other through a wall of eggs. This visualized the war between the empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu, in the first section of Swift's book, who bickered bitterly because in Lilliput they broke the small end of the egg first and in Blefsucu they broke the big end first, which was Swift's satire on the "battle for supremacy between Catholics and Protestants in eighteenth-century Europe."[7] The imposing Georgian town house that now houses Dublin's Hugh Lane Gallery was an appropriate setting for Shonibare's show as it was built in the eighteenth century by Lord Charlemont, who, like Jonathan Swift, was a member of the Protestant Anglo-Irish elite who opposed the English protectionist policies that left Ireland's textile industry in ruins.[8] As well as his installation, Shonibare also showed a selection of his recent *Climate Shit Drawings*, a series of collages

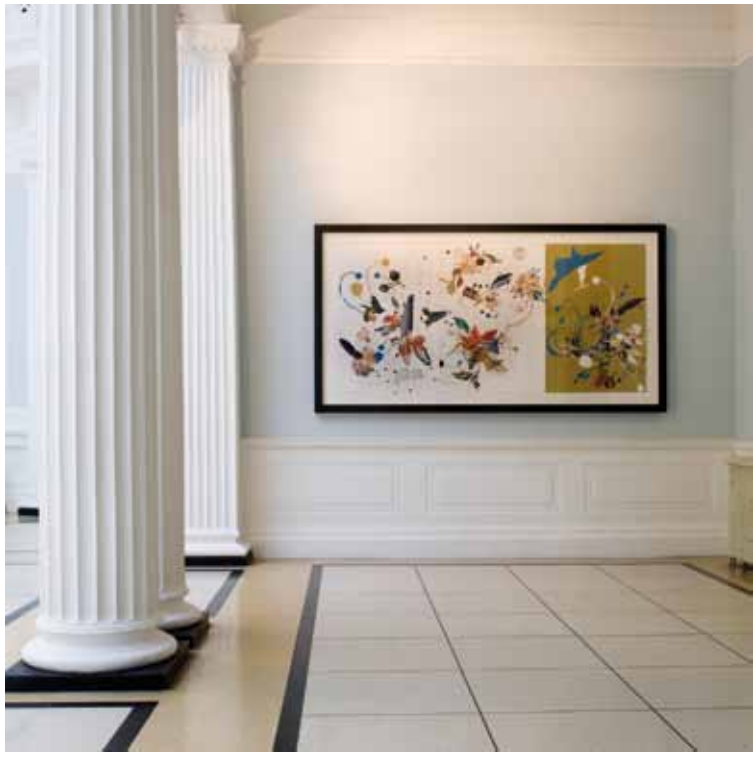

Figure 2
Yinka Shonibare, *Climate Shit Drawing* 7 (Triptych), 2009. Ink, Dutch wax cotton printed textile, newsprint and gold foil on paper. 50.4 cm × 434.4 cm. Photograph Eugene Langan. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery (London) and James Cohan Gallery (New York).

Figure 3
Installation view of Yinka Shonibare, *Egg Fight*, 2009 and *Climate Shit Drawings*, 2009. Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. Photograph Eugene Langan. Courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery (London) and James Cohan Gallery (New York).

that mediate on the most pressing preoccupation of the present phase of globalization—climate change. The imagery depicts the visual vocabulary of the global economy including images of flowers, airplanes, and scraps of newspapers.

One of the most visual episodes in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, certainly for younger readers, is the scene describing the Lilliputians—"two hundred sempstresses" and "three hundred taylors"—making Gulliver's gargantuan clothes (Swift 1994 [1726]: 51). It prompted me to question how the clothes on Shonibare's mannequins are actually sewn. Are they outsourced, as so much fashion manufacture is in the West (to the Third World), or is the artist involved in their facture like the many contemporary male artists for whom sewing is a central and subversive practice? The garments themselves are generally very historically accurate and technically accomplished, and Shonibare has openly acknowledged his mannequins' affinities with "dressmaker's dummies" (Hynes 2004: 398). However, with so much critical focus on the text/textile complexity of Shonibare's work, it would be interesting to know more about his ideas on sewing (does he favor hand or machine?), as it would strengthen the many strategies and approaches he deploys in his complex, and playful, deconstruction of cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, class, and race and about the history, and reality, of globalization. *Egg Fight* was a thought-provoking and visually stimulating show, and perfect in scale and setting. Shonibare's visualization, like Swift's writings, in the words of Sarat Maharaj "tend[s] to leave us less sure about imagining power as a dominating force radiating outwards from a

focal, colonizing source. We are alerted to the possibility of it being something like a two-way, creative/destructive process—even when 'the one' seems to be calling all the shots" (Maharaj 1991: 89).

Notes

1. Homi K. Bhabha, 1985. "Signs Taken for Wonders." *Critical Inquiry* 12(1): 153. Patrick Brantlinger, 1996. "A Postindustrial Prelude to Postcolonialism." *Critical Inquiry* 22(3): 466.
2. Anne Hollander, 1975. *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 363. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. See also Nina Felshin, 1995. "Clothing as Subject." *Art Journal* 54(1): 20.
3. Jessica Hemmings, 2009. "Yinka Shonibare MBE." *Embroidery* May/June: 46.
4. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, 2005. "Ordering the Universe: Documenta II and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze." *Art Journal* 64(1): 86. The work commissioned from Shonibare for *Documenta 11* was entitled *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002).
5. Brenda McParland, 2001. *Vantage Point: Ernesto Neto, Rob Pruitt, Michael Raedecker*, *Daniel Richter*, *Ugo Rondinone*, *Yinka Shonibare*. Dublin: IMMA, n.p.
6. Sarag Durcan, 2001. "Review: Dublin 1." *Circa* 96: 50.
7. "Yinka Shonibare MBE: *Egg Fight*," gallery information panel.
8. The Hugh Lane Gallery has been located on Dublin's Parnell Square since 1930 (it was known as Rutland Square in the eighteenth century).

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Hynes, Nancy. 2004. "Yinka Shonibare: Addressing the Wondering Mind." In Salah Hassan and Dadi Iftikhar (eds.), *Unpacking Europe: Towards a Critical Reading*. Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and NAi Publishers.

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